

Central Intelligence Agency



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South Korea: Retreat on Campus
Liberalization ProgramSummary

Seoul's retreat from its campus autonomy policy, viewed by many South Koreans as the litmus of Chun's commitment to "democratization," has set back the near-term prospects for political reform. Blue House thinking on the proper response to continuing campus unrest is in flux, but Seoul does not appear inclined to make the political concessions that could forestall an escalation of campus tensions. We believe that chances are better than even that shortly after (or possibly even before) National Assembly elections in mid-February, Seoul will further tighten political controls on student protest leaders and other critics. This will further erode public confidence in Chun's promise to oversee a peaceful transfer of power in 1988.

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"Campus Autonomy" Policy Fails

Seoul's decision in November to reclaim the right to use riot police on campus rather than allowing the universities to make that decision themselves was driven, in our view, by a growing awareness among Chun's advisers that its eight-month experiment with leniency had failed to achieve its original objectives:

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 25 December was incorporated. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Korea Branch [redacted]

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- The violent tactics of the most radical students had not discredited them in the eyes of most university students as the authorities had expected.
- The universities were unable or unwilling to discipline student agitators.
- Most Koreans still viewed the continuing campus unrest as a failure of government policy.

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Off-campus demonstrations during the past several months at times have involved more than a thousand students. Protestors have been increasingly willing to employ violence, including burning police vehicles, conducting hit-and-run attacks on police substations and ruling party offices, and detaining and forcibly interrogating suspected police informants.

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The boycott of mid-term exams at Seoul National University in late October -- the episode that brought the police back on campus -- appeared to reflect student solidarity with protest leaders. Professors state that less than one-third of the students took exams. The strong support afforded the action by SNU law students, who represent the most competitive and prestigious department in South Korea, was particularly significant.

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Protest organizers also appear to have reformulated their demands to broaden their appeal and to identify better with the concerns of the South Korean majority:

- Assaults on the legitimacy of the Chun government have faded as a principal theme.
- Criticism of Chun's trip to Japan in early September was quickly dropped when this provoked little popular response.
- Student protests have increasingly highlighted press freedom and labor law reform, as well as such campus issues as elected student government.
- Student protestors for the first time have sought support for campus "democratization" from the opposition Democratic Korea Party (DKP).

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[REDACTED]

The Government's Reassessment and Public Reaction

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[REDACTED] Chun's crackdown may have been a reaction, in part, to evidence that low-wage workers were beginning to view student protestors as allies in their demands for labor law reform and better working conditions. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, the South Korean public believes campus problems are chiefly the fault of ill-advised government policies. The DKP's vigorous support for autonomous student government, as well as its offer to help in the legal defense of the leaders of the sit-in at ruling party headquarters suggests that the opposition perceives widespread public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the problem. Most Koreans deplore the escalating violence, but historically there has been deep attachment in Korea to the notion that students represent the country's "moral conscience." In addition, with more than one-fourth of Korean youth now attending higher learning institutions, many Korean families see themselves as at least potentially affected by tougher government behavior toward student protestors. [REDACTED]

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Press commentary has focussed on the failure to devise a solution to the student problems rather than on the danger to stability posed by radical activists, underscoring growing public impatience with Seoul's inability to solve the campus crisis. [REDACTED]

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Seoul, we believe, hopes that limited concessions on the issue of student membership in freely formed associations will prevent a backlash against tougher handling of dissident activists. According to a Ministry of Education official, the government plans to introduce some form of popularly elected student government. [REDACTED]

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Chun's Perspective

President Chun, nonetheless, appears in no mood to make concessions that would significantly expand university self-rule or moderate the treatment of protest leaders. [REDACTED]

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According to the US Embassy, Chun sees political "liberalization" as a means to achieve political stability and social harmony and has limited patience with reforms that do not produce relatively prompt advances toward these pragmatic goals. The failure of the National Assembly to draft compromise legislation on elected student associations before the close of

[redacted]

the assembly session may be a further indication that Chun is
unprepared to venture any bold steps at this time. [redacted]

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[redacted]

We believe that Chun is unlikely to take the steps --
beginning with sanctioning elected student government --
necessary to persuade both the students and the public that he
will carry out meaningful political reforms over the next several
years. We also doubt that limited concessions can prevent a new
tightening of tension and further confrontation when the schools
reopen in late February. We believe chances are better than even
that Chun will significantly increase controls on political
expression within the next several months. [redacted]

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The Elections as Pressure Point

The National Assembly elections in February could make Chun
even more resistant to moving forward on reforms. A number of
opposition and dissident groups, including supporters of
Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae Jung, have formed a new opposition
party, tentatively named the "New Korea Democratic Party" (NKDP)
with strong anti-Chun precepts. [redacted]

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The emergence of the NKDP has already triggered defections
from the DKP, and the challenge posed by the new party will put
pressure on the present opposition parties to attack the
government more aggressively. The probable homecoming of exiled
dissident Kim Dae Jung will further complicate the election
campaign. Kim, who has announced that he will return around
January 31, may hope that his cause will become a major campaign
issue as well as a rallying point for protest activities. [redacted]

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Chun could move against student activists before the
balloting despite the risk of a public backlash. Several hundred
students at Seoul National University and Yonsei University
recently formed a committee to oppose the dictions in direct
defiance of government warnings against such efforts. Even if
Chun should wait until after the elections, a crackdown on
student activists after the elections, particularly if the
government fails to accompany such a move with some type of
freely formed student associations, will raise doubts among many
Koreans about Chun's commitment to broadening political
participation before the end of his term in 1988, when he has

[redacted]

promised to step down. The government's policy toward student unrest will probably likely to remain for most Koreans a litmus of Chun's commitment to political reform, and we believe he will find it difficult to deal effectively with other political demands until the campus problem is resolved. [redacted]

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